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CURTAINS

CURTAINS

By HAZEL HALL

I have curtained my window with filmy seeming,
Overhanging it with chintz of dreaming,
That I may watch through sun and rain
Beside the windowpane.

Faintly my curtains stir and flutter
Before the words that loud rains utter,
And through their fabric, cool and still,
The sun falls on the sill.

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NOTE. In certain of these poems I have blended metrical and irregular rhythms in an attempt to contrast monotonous motion, presented in even measures, with interruption which is expressed in freer forms.

THE AUTHOR.

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PART ONE
CURTAINS

FRAMES

Brown window-sill, you hold my all of skies,
And all I know of springing year and fall,
And everything of earth that greets my eyes—
Brown window-sill, how can you hold it all?

Grey walls, my days are bound within your hold,
Cast there and lost like pebbles in a sea;
And all my thought is squared to fit your mould—
Grey wall, how mighty is your masonry!

JUNE NIGHT

Into my room to-night came June,
A band of stars caught up her hair,
And woven of the mist of moon,
And patterned from the leaf-laced air,
Her garments spread a soft perfume
Over the shadows of my room.

But hardly had her coming stirred
My darkness with a hope like dawn,
Or had my anxious silence heard
Her faint footfall, than she was gone.
She went as though with a quick fear
Of the eternal winter here.

SUN GLAMOUR

The day has brought me sun-loaned cheer,
And to unchangeable ways, change . . .
But dusk is here to make them strange,
Making them clear.

THE WORLD'S VOICE

If I listen shall I hear
Sounds that seem to hover near?
Speech of ship calling to ship
Through dark tides that twist and grip,
Dash of spray on a splintered coast,
The whisper-flutter of a host
Of sun-coloured butterflies
Wheeling under marbled skies;
The jabber of a little wind
Where the meadows' grass is thinned—
Or where trees forget their prides
To sway in unison like tides;
All the city's formal din;
All the hush where big streets thin
To little crooked lanes and lose
Themselves as the green distance blues
Into space—— Oh, everything
That can either sound or sing!

To-day my four grey walls are strung
So thin, each echo has a tongue;
The world has raised its voice to-day
That I may hear what it has to say.

I listen . . .

What I hear
Is only the longing of an ear
Too much concerned with the cry of space,
And with listening in a quiet place.

SEASONS

Winter, spring, summer and fall—
Shadow-lights upon a wall:

Gleams of grey fleeing the path
Where the wind walks cold with wrath;

Yellow-fluttered petalled things
Like flower ghosts of other springs;

Curtains of dull, sticky gold,
Smothering hours in their fold;

Smoky rays that stir and creep
Aimlessly, like tired sheep.

Winter, spring, summer and fall—
Shadows fading on a wall.

FOOTSTEPS

They pass so close, the people on the street;
Footfall, footfall;
I know them from their footsteps' pulsing beat;
Footfall, footfall;
The tripping, lingering and the heavy feet;
I hear them call:

I am the dance of youth, and life is fair!
Footfall, footfall;
I am a dream, divinely unaware!
Footfall, footfall;
I am the burden of an old despair!
Footfall . . .

TO A DOOR

Door, you stand in your darkened frame
Mindful of your wooden might,
Flaunting relentlessly your claim
As guardian of sound and light.

Yet for all your vigil, Door,
Shadows that slip on panting feet
Over your threshold tinge the floor
With what was sunlight on the street.

And sounds fluttering in to die
(Door, you thought I should not know!)
Were started by an echo's cry
That was a voice not long ago.

FLOOR OF A ROOM

The walls and windows of my room,
With stolid constancy
Spreading checkered light or gloom,
Belong to me.
Of all my room the floor alone
Is not my own.

Days, like armfuls of fresh flowers
Slowly . . . I scatter there;
Yet for my offering of hours
I may share
Only the cold, disquiet rest
Of a passing guest.

Always I must waive my rights
To feet, who, strange and still,
Press their claims on windy nights;
And not until
I come again, another ghost,
Shall I be host.

THE HAND-GLASS

I am holding up a mirror
To look at life; in my hand-glass
I see a strange, hushed street below me
Where people pass.
The street is coloured like a picture,
And people passing there
Move with the majesty of story,
And are less real and wise than fair.

Looking at life in a mirror
Is distortion. I must see
Through the paint the flimsy canvas,
I must be
Cynical, and judge no passer
By the colour of a dress—
O eyes that must learn from a mirror,
Search for dust and bitterness!

SILENCE

Silence is the sound of footsteps
Hushed upon a stair,
The fluttering of ruffled garments,
A song's forgotten air—
All the old, forbidden echoes
That quenched their fevers there.

THINGS THAT GROW

I like things with roots that know the earth,
Trees whose feet, nimble and brown,
Wander around in the house of their birth
Until they learn, by growing down,
To build with branches in the air;
Ivy-vines that have known the loam
And over trellis and rustic stair,
Or old grey houses, love to roam;
And flowers pushing vehement heads,
Like flames from a fire's hidden glow,
Through the seething soil in garden-beds.
Yet I, who am forbidden to know
The feel of earth, once thought to make
Singing out of a heart's old cry!
Untaught by earth how could I wake
The shining interest of the sky?

STAIRWAYS

Why do I think of stairways
With a rush of hurt surprise?
Wistful as forgotten love
In remembered eyes;
And fitful as the flutter
Of little draughts of air
That linger on a stairway
As though they loved it there.

New and shining stairways,
Stairways worn and old,
Where rooms are prison places
And corridors are cold,
You intrigue with fancy,
You challenge with a lore
Elusive as a moon's light
Shadowing a floor.

You speak to me not only
With the lure of storied art—
For wonder of old footsteps
Lies lightly on my heart;
And more than the reminiscence
Of yesterday's renown—
Laughter that might have floated up,
Echoes that should drift down.

NIGHT SILENCE

A great mouth, lean and grey,
Munching the sounds of day:
Last voices and the beat
Of weather and late feet.

Gently parted lips
Telling of high white ships
That sail the imaged seas
Of borrowed memories.

Inexorable lips shut tight
Over the tongue of the night . . .

Suddenly the sick sound
Of crickets on the ground,
Or the long shuddering bark
Of a dog into the dark . . .

Insinuations of vain
Forgetfulness of pain,
Taunts of old moonlights
And other sound-stung nights.

COUNTERPANES

I will make myself new thought;
My own is worn and old.
And old counterpanes will not
Keep out the wind and cold.

From borrowed thought I will choose
Pieces, and, row on row,
Patch a quilt of many hues
Like the quilts of long ago.

It cannot be so fine
As what the years have thinned,
But I dread the smothered whine
Of four grey walls' grey wind.

I will patch me a counterpane,
For mine is worn to scars,
And I fear the iron rain
Of a ceiling's splashing stars.

PASSERS-BY

You—and you, Passer-by—and you;
You, languid feet, and you, wild to climb,
Seeking your respite or star-rimmed view,
Where do you go down the streets of Time?

Never the same, yet ever the same—
You and you, hurrying, slow,
Crowding the way with your motley claim
Of life, always you come and go.

You, stung with purpose. You, driven by
Blindly before Creation's sweep.
Are there ways for the searchers of stars on high?
And other ways for the seekers of sleep?

Or only one way for all to run? . . .
Only one sound drifts up to me,
The blend of every tread in one,
Impersonal as the beat of the sea.

LATE WINTER

I am content with latticed sights:
A lean grey bough, a frill
Of filmy cloud, the shadow-lights
Upon a window-sill.

I am content in wintered days
With all my eyes may meet.
April, when you dance down these ways
Hush your awakening feet.

BECAUSE OF JONQUILS

A ray of jonquils thrills the grey
And frowning winter of a room . . .
Out from the depths of an old day
A burst of spring-light cuts its way,
Lifting the vague perfume
Of walled-in gardens long, long dumb,
Of blooms that never bloomed at all . . .
Then quickly, as autumn's keen winds come,
Shadows, like dead leaves, fall.

UNSEEN

Often I am awaked from sleep to see—
Framed like a picture by the dark of night—
The sweep of space above a frozen height,
Or, lifting from a skyline, one dead tree.
Again it is the full tide leaping free
Over black rocks, or breaking blue and white.
Again, a rill that in leaf-filtered light,
With words of rustling water, calls to me.

These are not dreams of beauty I have known,
Nor mine the interest remembrance brings;
Only my fancy knows the tides' deep tone,
Only my longing seeks the tangled springs . . .
And yet they make a clearer, wilder call
Than if a fond remembering were all.

COMPANY

A footstep sounded from the street . . .
Listening, I knew of you!
With the good singing of your feet
You came in, too.

Companioned by the sun and rain,
Mingling with the winds at will,
You passed, but in your step's refrain
I have you still.

A CHILD DANCING

A child with unmanageable feet
Skips on the street below;
The wind has invited her to race,
The sun is a kiss upon her face
And the world a great applauding place.
I know . . .

She dances now with timid step,
Light as new leaves blow.
Her skirts are wings of butterflies,
And with every feathery grace she tries
Her feet cry out life's glad surprise . . .
I know . . .

ROADS

One road leads out to the country-side;
One road goes by on its way to town;
And always, as long as the sun is guide,
The feet that love them go up and down.

After the evening star's white light
Has lured from the hills or the lighted town,
There are other feet all through the night,
Following dreams up and down.

THE ROOM UPSTAIRS

Room just above me
Over my own,
I have not seen you,
I have not known
Where your big bed stands,
Where is your chair,
Whether your windows
Look here or look there.

Room just above me,
Long have I kept
Vigil below you
While others slept,
Thinking of footsteps
Known to your floor,
Which passed from your threshold
To come there no more.

Room just above me,
To-night it seems
There is new creaking
Over your beams;

It might be the night-wind,
It might be the tread
Of one who is lonely,
Or bored, being dead.

THE PROUD STEED

I plunge at the rearing hours;
Life is a steed of pride,
Who so high above me towers
I cannot mount and ride.

SONGS FOR DREAMS

Some dreams that I have loved
And dreamed by night and day,
Though they are lost to me,
Are never far away.

A part of lurking winds,
Of silence in grey rooms—
From every echoed sound,
And out of corner-glooms

They come as strange as ghosts,
A little death-sad throng,
Beseeching me with praying hands
To give them life in song.

NOBODY PASSES

Nobody passes on the street.
The day is set, like a stage, for feet,
With a ridge of white clouds painted high
Across the canvas of the sky;
With pavement gleaming and too clean;
A shimmer of grass that seems too green,
And houses alert on every side
Showing a stiff and conscious pride.
The day is a stage, and life is a play—
But nobody passes down this way.

SHADOWS

One shadow on my wall, an intimate
Of dusk, comes only when it comes alone.
It lifts out of new dark and spreads a great
Wing of quiet where once the sun has shone,
Cooling the air like rain on stone.

Such shadow might find entrance to a tomb,
And be at home in places where the dead
Are fitful sleepers; moving through the gloom
It might lay benediction on a head
That death has left uncomforted.

TWILIGHT

Tiptoeing twilight,
Before you pass,
Bathe light my spirit
As dew bathes grass.

Quiet the longing
Of my hands that yearn,
As you fold the flower
And hush the fern.

Guard me with shadows
To fortify
My failing purpose,
My tired eye,

That in your stillness
I may relight
My faith's frail candle
Before the night.

ECSTASY

For moments of this life's swift cycle made
Commemorable with you, O Ecstasy,
Shall we be reconciled in worlds to be,
Shall we find recompense when death is paid?
I can imagine in eternal shade
Solace for tired dreams, and in the sea
Equivalent for moods of stress or glee;
In stars an old unrest merged and allayed.

What element can give us, in your name,
Redress which is appreciable before
The concept of the universal mind?
You, who are multiform, to one a flame,
Soul-scourging; to another are defined
In sudden earth-breaths through an opened door.

CAPTIVE

My spirit is a captive bird
That beats against its cage all day,
Until its winging strength is whirred
Vainly away.

My spirit learns its impotence
Only when night has blurred its bars.
Wings seem a strange impertinence
Before the stars.

COWARDICE

Discomfort sweeps my quiet as a wind
Leaps at trees and leaves them cold and thinned.
Not that I fear again the mastery
Of winds, for holding my indifference dear
I do not feel illusions stripped from me.
And yet this is a fear—
A fear of old discarded fears, of days
That cried out at irrevocable ways.
I cower for my own old cowardice,
For hours that beat upon the wind's broad breast
With hands as impotent as leaves are; this
Robs my new hour of rest.

I thought my pride had covered long ago
All the old scars, like broken twigs in snow.
I thought to luxuriate in rich decay,
As some far-seeing tree upon a hill;
But startled into shame for an old day
I find that I am but a coward still.

BEFORE THOUGHT

Dawn paints quaint histories
In pageant on my wall;
Imminent destinies
Concern it not at all.

SHADOW-BOUND

You whom the shadows beckoned
Long and long ago,
Who taught me the flaming utterance
Of words, now strange and slow
On my lips that loved them
Long—Oh, long ago . . .

Why have you stirred the silence
That flowered from my pain?
Just now your anxious footstep
Sounded above the rain;
Just now your eyes, beseeching,
Shadowed my windowpane.

A FALLING STAR

I hope I shall remember,
The day I come to die,
The welcome of this morning's dawn,
This evening's good-night sky.

I hope I shall remember
The kindly little star,
Caught in to-night's mist-matted hair,
Which greeted me afar.

And how as I was watching,
Loving its little light,
Fleet as a dream it dropped and fell
Into the urn of night.

FEET

Feet, I am weary of your beat;
All day, all year, all life you pass
Below me on the street,
Driven upon my hearing as the grass
Before wild rain and sleet.

You snatch up in your tidal tone
The reaching rhythms of my peace
And substitute your drone,
Until intimidated dreams release
The visions they have known.

Feet, I am weary of your stave—
The little course your sounds pursue—
Weary that I must waive
My reaches in subservience to you,
Who seek only a grave.

FLASH

I am less of myself and more of the sun;
The beat of life is wearing me
To an incomplete oblivion,
Yet not to the certain dignity
Of death. *They cannot even die*
Who have not lived.

The hungry jaws
Of space snap at my unlearned eye,
And time tears in my flesh like claws.

If I am not life's, if I am not death's,
Out of chaos I must re-reap
The burden of untasted breaths.
Who has not waked may not yet sleep.

ECHOES

Day-long I hear life's sounds beat like the sea;
Day-long, day-long
They sweep their deep tide-rhythms over me,
And as a song
Reiterated, fall unmeaningly.

Where once I bent life's echoes to my will,
Day after day
Following wings of sound over the sill
Far, far away,
Now my sick fancy lies inert and still.

Silence that slowly wraps me with the ease
Of dreamed-out sleep,
Quenches the sound of vague realities
Whose echoes keep
Their rhythms like old winds in drying seas.

LONELINESS

Sometimes when I am long alone
I wonder what is loneliness—
This silence like a deep bell's tone,
These moments, motionless?

This hush above the nervous street?
Removed as is the tree that stands,
Hill-high, with burrowing root-feet
And boughs like reaching hands.

As in my blood I feel life press,
Like sap into the frailest bough,
I think if such is loneliness
Then I am lonely now.

SUNLIGHT THROUGH A WINDOW

Beauty streamed into my hand
In sunlight through a pane of glass;
Now at last I understand
Why suns must pass.

I have held a shadow, cool
Reflection of a burning gold,
And it has been more beautiful
Than hands should hold.

To that delicate tracery
Of light, a force my lips must name
In whispers of uncertainty,
Has answered through me in a flame.

Beauty is a core of fire
To reaching hands; even its far
Passing leaves a hurt desire
Like a scar.

RECORD

Dreams are eyes fixed on closed doors
And on threshold-lights lighting cold floors.

Dreams are doors swung strangely back
On the wonder of a ribbony track.

Dreams are voices, echoed and thinned,
Calling . . . drowned out in the wind.

Dreams are feet on the edge of lands
Feeling the suck of hidden sands.

MY SONG

My song that was a sword is still.
Like a scabbard I have made
A covering with my will
To sheathe its blade.

It had a flashing tongue of steel
That made old shadows start;
It would not let the darkness heal
About my heart.

THE GREY VEIL

Life flings weariness over me
Like a thick grey veil; I see
Through its mesh where suns are cold,
Nights are ancient and dawns are old.

Now at last with glamour gone
I can see the naked dawn;
Gauge the hollow depths of noon,
Coolly question star and moon.

And where fired sunsets pale
I, who wear life's grey veil,
Shall not marvel, shall not care.
No light of earth's however fair,
Robbed of the sting of its surprise,
Can delude my sober eyes.

THE ANSWER

I asked the watchful corners of a ceiling,
And the little darkened cracks the years scrawled
there,
Why there are suns, and if there is a purpose
Behind this mask of life that people wear.

I asked some gnarled and patient shadows groping
Like wise hands of old blind men, on my wall;
And everything I asked answered my question
With that one answer which does well for all.

HOURS

I have known hours built like cities,
House on grey house, with streets between
That lead to straggling roads and trail off,
Forgotten in a field of green;

Hours made like mountains lifting
White crests out of the fog and rain,
And woven of forbidden music—
Hours eternal in their pain.

Life is a tapestry of hours
Forever mellowing in tone,
Where all things blend, even the longing
For hours I have never known.

THE CIRCLE

Dreams—and an old, old waking,
An unspent vision gone;
Night, clean with silence, breaking
Into loud dawn.

A wonder that is blurring
The new day's strange demands,
The indomitable stirring
Of folded hands.

Then only the hours' pageant
And the drowsing sound of their creep,
Bringing at last the vagrant
Dreams of new sleep.

DEFEAT

Is this defeat then, after all—
This new indifference to the street,
This unfelt weight of roof and wall—
Is this defeat?

I thought to make my spirit wear
Glittering garments of unrest,
To keep my keen, knife-edged despair
Unsheathed and brilliantly unrepressed

But days have worn my unrest thin;
Time's soft fingers gently close
Over my outstretched hand, and in
Their certain touch I feel repose.

This is defeat; I will submit,
Resigned to the quieting decree
Of defeat that is indefinite
As victory.

THE IMPARTIAL GIVER

I who have spent my hands in futile weaving,
And you who flung yours out before the sun,
For all you held, for all my restless grieving,
What have you, more than I have, really won?

My industry has faltered; through your fingers
Your sunlight sifts like finely running sands;
And Time shall bring us, when the last star lingers,
A cross to hold, made of our humbled hands.

SANDS

My days are like sands; colourless,
Each matched to each, unerringly
They drift. The salt bleach of a sea
Has washed them clean and lustreless;
The teeth of rock on ragged strands
Have ground them to an even grey,
And one wind blows them a one way.

But Oh, the slow making of sands.

All is here; forgotten things
Mix with the unforgettable,
Granite blends with tinted shell,
And nothing so stable that it clings
To its stability. Had there
Been more of marble, more of gold,
The sands would hide in their grim hold
Nothing more wise, nothing more fair.

But Oh, the slow making of sands.

Grain on grain of even grey,
Slowly they drift in the one way
Covering the wreck that stands
Against my beach of life. One mast
Cuts at the sky, the hull is fast
In sand—the slow-made sands that pull
With the wind . . . covering . . .
And leaving every broken thing
Hushed and coldly beautiful.

PART TWO
NEEDLEWORK

KNITTING NEEDLES

When my great-grandmother died
She left a trunkful of remembering things.
There are carved boxes of sandalwood
Guarding inconsequential trifles of grave consequence,
Like scraps of faded ribbon and broken jewellery
And the ash of a pressed rose.
There are fans of ivory,
Pieces of fine, worn lace,
And bundles of yellowed letters.
But most remembering of all are her knitting needles.
They are made of black bone
And gleam with sudden creamy light, like lacquer.
When I touch them
They are cold with the death of many years.
Then quickly they take on a sensuous warmth,
And speak under my knitting hands:

Long ago . . .
There was a garden steeped in spring,
And in remembering . . .
A seat in the shade where flowers were—
A seat in the shade—and a riotous blur
Of colour and scent and sun-gold June . . .
And the warm-armed mists of last night's moon,
Clouding, shrouding everything
With new remembering . . .
And every heedless second stirred
At a needle's click, and passed unheard,
Keeping, sweeping Time.

Long ago . . .
There was a window whose shining pane,
Sun-bright or dimmed with rain,
Framed vistas of an empty day
And a winding road winding away
To end like a ravelled thread,
Winding away to coax a tread,
Yet only echoes might it bring,
Echoes, long remembering—
Echoes, vibrant unsilenced sound
That caught up the days in its spirals and wound
The months, the years, around and around,
And hurled them out of the truth of things
Into the heaven of rememberings . . .
What mattered the minutes slipping past
Under wan hands—unheeded, fast—
Keeping, leaping Time?

Long ago . . .
There were grey depths in a white-walled room
Of uncomputed gloom.
There was no sound save a click, click, click,
As even and true as a good clock's tick;
And nothing of musical silence was there
To ease the weight of unwaved air.
Outside there was no winter nor spring,
Within there was no remembering—
There was no need of remembering,
Except to cast on the stitches right;
Only the need of a little light
A little longer—nothing at all
Save the clicking moments' rise and fall,
As, proud in their own importance at last,
They clicked and nicked their way . . . and
passed . . .
Into Time.

STITCHES

Over and under,
Under and out.
Thread that is fibre,
Thread that is stout.

I'm not singing;
I'm sewing.

Days that are futile,
Days that are wise,
Holding the visions
Of dead men's eyes.

I tell you I'm not singing;
If you hear anything
It's my needle.

Days that are prophets
With prophecies
Blunted and tangled
As Eternity's.

I say if you hear anything—

Life-threaded hours;
Purpose that wraps
Fine stitch on fine stitch—
Then ravels . . . and snaps.

MONOGRAMS

I am monogramming
Seven dozen napkins,
With tablecloths to match,
For a bride.

Ninety-one times my needle shall trace
The leaf-like scrolls that interlace
Each other; up the padded side
Of the monogram my eye shall guide
For ninety-one days where the stitches run;
And every day one more is done.

She is tall and fair,
She will be married
In June. . . .

The linen is fine as satin is fine;
Its shining coolness flaunts design
Of death-white poppies, trailing ferns
Rioting richly from Grecian urns.

Ghost-flowers.
Cold, cold . . .

All these patterned splendours fade
Before the crest my hands have made;
In the lifeless flax my stitches cry
With life my hands may not put by.

June . . .
Real flowers,
Moist and warm to touch,
Like flesh . . .

And by and by with all the rest
Of intimate things in her bridal-chest,
Gentle muslins and secret lace,
Something of mine will have a place;
Caught in these scrolls and filigrees
There will be that which no eye sees,
The bulk of a season's smothered wonder,
My ninety-one days stitched under and under.

They will be decking an altar
With white roses,
And lacing an aisle
With white ribbon. . . .

LATE HOURS

Crowds are passing on the street,
Tuck on tuck and pleat on pleat
Of people hurrying along,
Homeward bound, throng on throng.
Their work is finished, mine undone;
Still my stitches run.

I cannot watch the people go,
Fold on fold and row on row;
But I know each pulsing tread
Is spinning out a life's fine thread;
I know the stars, like needle-gleams,
Are pricking through the sky's wide seams;
And soon the moon must show its face,
Like a pearl button stitched in place.
All the long hours of the day
Are finished now and folded away;
Yet the hem is still undone
Where my stitches run.

MENDING

Here are old things:
Fraying edges,
Ravelling threads;
And here are scraps of new goods,
Needles and thread,
An expectant thimble,
A pair of silver-toothed scissors.

Thimble on a finger,
New thread through an eye;
Needle, do not linger,
Hurry as you ply.
If you ever would be through
Hurry, scurry, fly!

Here are patches,
Felled edges,
Darned threads,
Strengthening old utility,
Pending the coming of the new.

Yes, I have been mending . . .
But also,
I have been enacting
A little travesty on life.

BEAD WORK

Restless needle, where my beads
Whip with colour, roll like seeds,
Dive, and pick up one and one,
One and one till we are done;
And fasten each one firm and true
Where the pattern tells you to—
One and one, and one and one.

One and one, and one and one—
Flying needle, as you run,
As you pick up the lobes of light
Mind you guide each sparkle right;
Mind this tawny brown you choose,
Shading it with light wood hues,
When you shape the curving rim
Of this great basket, on whose brim
Heap the designated green,
From new-leaf shades to laurel's sheen.
Then with dawn-pinks and heavy reds
Paint the drowsy roses' heads.
Let dreamy mauves and tones of brass,
And bits of blue in mosaic mass,

Speak for the tints of timid bloom
Which share the shadows' checkered
gloom . . .

Sleepy flowers,
Speeding hours,
Hours, flowers, hours . . .

SEAMS

I was sewing a seam one day—
Just this way—
Flashing four silver stitches there
With thread, like this, fine as a hair,
And then four here, and there again,
When
The seam I sewed dropped out of sight . . .
I saw the sea come rustling in,
Big and grey, windy and bright . . .
Then my thread that was as thin
As hair, tangled up like smoke
And broke.
I threaded up my needle, then—
Four here, four there, and here again.

FINISHED TO-NIGHT

I have unleashed my hands, like hounds,
And I must not call them back;
They are off with virile bounds
On the hidden quarry's track.

Though there come rain or sun—
Fleet and lean and white,
They will follow the scent until they run
The quarry to earth, and the quarry is night.

A BABY'S DRESS

It is made of finest linen—
Sheer as wasp-wings;
It is made with a flowing panel
Down the front,
All overrun with fagot-stitched bow-knots
Holding hours and hours
Of fairy-white forget-me-nots.

And it is finished.
To-night, crisp with new pressing,
It lies stiffly in its pasteboard box,
Smothered in folds of tissue paper
Which envelop it like a shroud—
In its coffin-shaped pasteboard box.

To-morrow a baby will wear it at a christening;
To-morrow the dead-white of its linen
Will glow with the tint of baby skin;
And out of its filmy mystery
There will reach
Baby hands. . . .

But to-night the lamplight plays over it and
finds it cold.
Like the flower-husk of a little soul,
Which, new-lived, has fluttered to its destiny,
It lies in its coffin-shaped pasteboard box.

To-morrow will make it what hands cannot:
Limp and warm with babyness,
A hallowed thing,
A baby's dress.

CROSS-STITCH

I put one little slanting stitch
On another little slanting stitch,
Forming rows of crisscross squares,
Until I had made a peacock;
And always my hands tingled
With the song of my needle:

A little crisscross stitch I take—
Yellow and green and blue;
Out of a sea of them I make
Beautiful peacock you.

Yet finished,
He disappointed me,
And I shuddered at his restraint.
But that night
When he walked out of the sleepy shadows,
With one wink of a wicked, yellow-lidded
eye,
I was satisfied.

I took a thread of every shade—
Yellow and green and blue;
Out of a sea of them I made
Beautiful peacock you.

PLAIN SEWING

My stitches, like the even tide of feet
Beating against the pavement of the street
Below my window-sill, forever run
Before the footsteps of the sun.

Down streets of seams, and formal avenues
Of basted hems, each crowding stitch pursues,
Seeking no destination on the way—
Only the end of day.

SEWING HANDS

My hands are motion; they cannot rest.
They are the foam upon the sea,
Borne with a wave to a fleeting crest,
Hurled back, borne on, unceasingly.

They are existent and made whole
In their unrest, as the entity
Of foam is spun where waters roll
Back, and on, eternally.

LINGERIE

To-day my hands have been flattered
With the cool-finger touch of thin linen,
And I have unwound
Yards of soft, folded nainsook
From a stiff bolt.
Also I have held a piece of lawn
While it marbled with light
In a sudden quiver of sun.

So to-night I know of the delicate pleasure
Of white-handed women
Who like to touch smooth linen handkerchiefs,
And of the baby's tactual surprise
In closing its fist
Over a handful of nainsook,
And even something of the secret pride of the girl
As the folds of her fine lawn nightgown
Breathe against her body.

FILET CROCHET

I make a band of filet crochet,
And this is the pattern I never forget:
A rose, a wreath and the latticed net
Of fine filet crochet.

Thread over needle, and over again:
Lattice, a wreath and a single rose—
That is the way the pattern goes
Over and over again.

Finish the rose and start the wreath,
And careful lest, O hurrying thread,
Something climbs over the lattice instead
Of a single rose and a wreath.

Finish the wreath and start the rose,
And pull in, needle, strangling tight,
Choking out anything else that might
Climb with a wreath and a rose.

Under, needle; and over, thread;
Something may grow by a garden wall,
Yet nothing must grow in a pattern at all
But a rose and a wreath of thread.

So thread over needle, and over again,
Until there is nothing else that grows—
Only a wreath and a thready rose
Over and over again.

HEAVY THREADS

When the dawn unfolds like a bolt of ribbon
Thrown through my window,
I know that hours of light
Are about to thrust themselves into me
Like omnivorous needles into listless cloth,
Threaded with the heavy colours of the sun.
They seem altogether too eager
To embroider this thing of mine,
My Day,
Into the strict patterns of an altar cloth;
Or at least to stitch it into a useful garment.
But I know they will do nothing of the kind.
They will prick away,
And when they are through with it
It will look like the patch quilt my grandmother made
When she was learning to sew.

BUTTONHOLES

Cut a little opening
And overcast it, then
(Throwing the thread across each stitch)
Stitch it round again.

A moment's stitching finds it
Finished; but not until
The sun has burned its beauty out
And dropped behind the hill.

PUZZLED STITCHES

Needle, running in and out,
In and out, in and out,
Do you know what you're about,
In and out, in and out?

Fingers, going to and fro,
To and fro, to and fro,
Do you know the path you go,
To and fro, to and fro?

I might tell you why you're taking
Such good stitches: You are making
Out of linen, fine as breaking
Ocean-spray upon a bluff,
Pleating for a Bishop's cuff!

I might make you understand
That a Bishop's white, white hand,
Because of you, will be more fair,
Will be raised in better prayer.

Even then would you know
Why you're going to and fro?
Would you doubt what you're about,
Running in and running out?

SUMMER SEWING

Lengths of lawn and dimities,
Dainty, smooth and cool,
In their possibilities
Beautiful,

Stretch beneath my hand in sheets,
Fragrant from the loom,
Like a field of marguerites
All in bloom.

Where my scissors' footsteps pass
Fluttering furrows break,
As the scythe trails through the grass
Its deep wake.

All my stitches, running fleet,
Cannot match the tread
Of my thoughts whose wingèd feet
Race ahead.

They are gathering imagery
Out of time and space,
That a needle's artistry
May embrace:

Hints of dawn and thin blue sky,
Breaths the breezes bear,
Wispy-waspy things that fly
In warm air.

Bolts of dimity I take,
Muslin smooth and cool;
These my fingers love to make
Beautiful.

HABIT

Last night when my work was done,
And my estranged hands
Were becoming mutually interested
In such forgotten things as pulses,
I looked out of a window
Into a glittering night sky.

And instantly
I began to feather-stitch a ring around the
moon.

PATHS

Needle, you make me remember things . . .
A path through a wood that ran like wine,
A turn, and the bubbling smell that clings
Close as breath to the lips of springs
Where the sun is sprinkled fine.

Needle, you have a path to run
Where never the boughs of trees have met
And never has seeped the rain of the sun;
But long is the way you have just begun . . .
Needle, you make me forget.

RIPPING

Ripping, snipping,
Slashing, gnashing
Scissors,
Where the hours left light trail,
Where a needle etched a tale,
Catching in its driven thread
A little something of the sun
Like an adventitous shred
Of gold, in duller weaves misspun;
Something of the swallow-wings
That cut the sky in singing rings,
And something of the intimacy
Of trees whose boughs beckoned my eyes,
The things I had not time to see
Out of the day's unsprung surprise;
(And something . . . something more:
An incommunicable lore
Which left a trace along these seams
Elusive as the flare
Of a new moon's gleams
Dying on a templed stair. . . .)
Rip and snip,
Slash and gash,

Scissors,
Until your fatal way is run,
And every crying stitch undone;
Until your fine, cold teeth have snipped,
Slashed and gashed, clipped and ripped
Up and down my seams of day. . . .

The teeth of time have just that way.

MADE OF CRÊPE DE CHINE

A needle running in white crêpe de chine
Is not the frail servant of utility
It was designed to be;
It is an arrow of silver sunlight
Plunging with a waterfall.

And hands moving in white crêpe de chine
Are not slaves of the precedent
That governs them;
They are the crouching women of a fountain,
Who have sprung from marble into life
To bathe ecstatically
In the brimming basin.

MEASUREMENTS

Stitches running up a seam
Are not like feet beside a stream,
And the thread that swishes after
Is not at all like echoed laughter.
Yet stitches are as quick as feet,
Leaping from a rocky pleat
To seams that slip like marshy ground;
And thread-swish has a hollow sound.

Stitches that have a seam to sew
Must not forget the way they go,
While feet that find the cool earth sweet
Have forgotten they are feet,
And a laugher cares not why
His echoes have a haunted cry.
So stitches running up a seam
Are not like feet beside a stream,
And the thread that swishes after
Is not at all like echoed laughter.

INSTRUCTION

My hands that guide a needle
In their turn are led
Relentlessly and deftly
As a needle leads a thread.

Other hands are teaching
My needle; when I sew
I feel the cool, thin fingers
Of hands I do not know.

They urge my needle onward,
They smooth my seams, until
The worry of my stitches
Smothers in their skill.

All the tired women,
Who sewed their lives away,
Speak in my deft fingers
As I sew to-day.

THEN THE WIND BLEW

The tops of trees rest my eyes,
Especially the tips of old, dark firs
When they rebel against the small
manipulations
Of even air currents,
And leap at the sky.

MY NEEDLE'S THREAD

My needle's thread is long and slow;
As a needle goes a thread must go,
And lame and blind a needle is,
Weighed with a mood's profundities.

My needle's thread is long and slack;
A thread must travel a needle's track,
And a needle leads an aimless course
Labouring against the force
Of gathering thought . . .
A needle's thread will not be taut
When every stitch is made to feel
Pressure upon the needle's steel
Of coldly flowing reality,
Fluent as waters that find the sea.

My needle's thread is long and slack;
A needle is foiled and driven back
To feel, among its threads, the strands
Of life moving through losing hands.

TWO SEWING

The wind is sewing with needles of rain.
With shining needles of rain
It stitches into the thin
Cloth of earth. In,
In, in, in.
Oh, the wind has often sewed with me.
One, two, three.

Spring must have fine things
To wear like other springs.
Of silken green the grass must be
Embroidered. *One and two and three.*
Then every crocus must be made
So subtly as to seem afraid
Of lifting colour from the ground;
And after crocuses the round
Heads of tulips, and all the fair
Intricate garb that Spring will wear.
The wind must sew with needles of rain,
With shining needles of rain,
Stitching into the thin

Cloth of earth, in,
In, in, in,
For all the springs of futurity.
One, two, three.

THE LISTENING MACAWS

Many sewing days ago
I cross-stitched on a black satin bag
Two listening macaws.

They were perched on a stiff branch
With every stitch of their green tails,
Their blue wings, yellow breasts and sharply
turned heads,
Alert and listening.

Now sometimes on the edge of relaxation
My thought is caught back,
Like gathers along a gathering thread,
To the listening macaws;
And I am amazed at the futile energy
That has kept them,
Alert to the last stitch,
Listening into their black satin night.

THE LONG DAY

I am sewing out my sorrow,
Like a thread, wearing it thin;
It will be old and frayed to-morrow.
Needle, turn out; needle, turn in.

Sorrow's thread is a long thread.
Needle, one stitch; needle, two.
And sorrow's thread is a strong thread,
But I will wear it through.

Then not only will sorrow
Be old and thin and frayed;
But I shall have to-morrow
Something sorrow has made.

INANIMATE

A needle has no memories;
Less than the stir of frozen trees,
Than unheard rain falling on stone,
Are the seams that it has known.

AFTER EMBROIDERING

I can take mercerized cotton
And make a never-flower beautiful
By thinking of tulips growing in window-
boxes;
I can work into cloth
A certain hushed softness
From an imagined scrutiny
Of a lily's skin,
And embroider conventional designs the better
For thinking of brick garden paths.

But if I go farther,
If I follow the path,
Fling out the gate,
Plunge one breathless thought over
an horizon . . .
My hands lose their cunning.

THREE SONGS FOR SEWING

I

A fibre of rain on a windowpane
Talked to a stitching thread:
In the heaviest weather I hold together
The weight of a cloud.

To the fibre of rain on a windowpane
The talkative stitch replied:
I hold together with the weight of a feather
The heaviest shroud.

II

My needle says: Don't be young,
Holding visions in your eyes,
Tasting laughter on your tongue.
Be very old and very wise,
And sew a good seam up and down
In white cloth, red cloth, blue and brown.

My needle says: What is youth
But eyes drunken with the sun
Seeing farther than the truth,
Lips that call, hands that shun
The many seams they have to do
In white cloth, red cloth, brown and blue?

III

One by one, one by one,
Stitches of the hours run
Through the fine seams of the day,
Till like a garment it is done
And laid away.

One by one the days go by,
And suns climb up and down the sky;
One by one their seams are run—
As Time's untiring fingers ply
And life is done.

LATE SEWING

There is nothing new in what is said
By either a needle or a thread:
Stitch, says a needle, *Stitch,* says the thread;
Stitch for the living; stitch for the dead;
All seams measure the same.

Garb for the living is light and gay.
While that for the dead is a shrouding grey,
But all things match on a later day
When little worm-stitches in the clay
Finish all seams the same.

PART THREE
SPRING FROM A WINDOW

BLOSSOM-TIME

So long as there is April
My heart is high,
Lifting up its white dreams
To the sky.

As trees hold up their blossoms
In a blowing cloud,
My hands are reaching,
My hands are proud.

All the crumbled splendours
Of autumn, and the cries
Of winds that I remember
Cannot make me wise.

Like the trees of April
Fearless and fair—
My heart swings its censers
Through the golden air.

IN APRIL

Now I am Life's victim—
Cruel victor is he
Who lashes me with colour
Until I ache to see.

Who chokes me with fragrance
Of green things in the rain—
Like a hand around my throat
So sudden is the pain.

Life, I am at your mercy;
And though till I am dead
You torture me with April
I will not bow my head!

WHEN THERE IS APRIL

Who would fear death when there is April?
Like a flame, like a song,
To heal all who have lived with yearning
Year-through, life-long.

When there is April with fulfilment
For longing and for pain,
For every reaching hand that beauty
Has lured in vain.

Who would shrink from the earth when April
With slim rain hands shall reach
Through the doors of dark, and call them
Who love her speech.

FOREBODING

How shall I keep April
When my songs are done—
How can I be silent
And still feel the sun?

I, who dreaded silence,
I, who April-long
Kept my heart from breaking
With the cry of song.

How can I hold sunlight
In my hands, like gold,
And bear the pain of silence
When my songs are old?

THE END

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